

Dr. Renate Sommer, MEP:

**Town twinning - -
A path for Europe out of the crisis of
confidence?**

28. February 2015, Recklinghausen

I. Contribution of town twinning to reconciliation and democracy

Welcome

As member of the European Parliament for this region, the Ruhr Area, I am delighted that you have invited me to this important partnership event

Many thanks for this!

Honourable Europeans from Douai, Preston and Recklinghausen,

I am honoured that I may convey the greetings of the European Parliament and I congratulate you personally and on behalf of the representation of European citizens to the 50th anniversary of the town twinning between Douai and Recklinghausen.

It is a huge achievement to keep such a partnership alive over such a long time. After all, it is a real challenge to animate a town twinning and it requires huge efforts, which could not be accomplished without the support of the many volunteers.

Formerly, town twinnings were considered as biggest peace movement in Europe.

The war experience was so terrible.

"No more war!" - That is the underlying principle, that eventually led to the confederation that we call European Union today.

In 1957, the heads of government from France, Italy, Germany and the BENELUX countries laid down the foundation stone for the European Union with the Treaties of Rome.

The idea behind it was to economically connect the European countries to such an extent, that they can only act together and not against each other anymore.

In order to prevent war, they were supposed to grow together.

This idea of European integration was taken up by the town twinning movement.

European Integration from the bottom up was the key word.

It was obvious that inter-governmental contracts and official contacts would not be enough to achieve reconciliation between the European citizens, who had fiercely combatted each other during the world wars.

Reconciliation and the reduction of prejudices can only be successful when citizens meet each other in person.

Particularly the German-Franco and German-English town twinnings contributed to reconciliation after the two world wars - not only among those countries but also for entire Europe.

Therefore it does not come as a surprise, that German-Franco town twinnings still constitute the majority of the 15.000 town twinnings that exist in the EU.

The exchange addressed citizens from all generations. However, it was and still is particularly important for young people. After all, we work towards a better future.

When you look at survey results from our member states, you can see that the opinion on the country of the respective partner city and its citizens has significantly improved.

While during the 60ties and 70ties, town twinning contributed to reconciliation between the war parties, in the 80ties they paved the way towards democracy in Eastern European countries.

The exchange of cities in the west and towns in Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic was one puzzle piece that brought down the Iron Curton.

Of course, town twinning alone cannot prevent conflicts.

The conflict in Ukraine is the sad proof.

I do, however, have the hope that the constant exchange of our cities with communities in Ukraine and Russia will enhance the comprehension of our similarities and dependencies and that the citizens in the conflict countries will fight against a total escalation of the conflict.

II. Town twinning through the ages

Of course, talks about town twinning in the EU have been winding down.

Because of the open borders and exchange programs like Erasmus+, Comenius and Sokrates the ongoing exchange of young people within the EU is actually no longer dependent on town twinning.

Graduation of a traineeship or of studies in other EU member states is no longer an exception but normality.

Social media, like Facebook, add to connect people without even leaving their homes.

But you all know, ladies and gentlemen, that it is important, to step out of the door. The new media is by no means a substitution for the real physical contact from face to face.

People need to get to know each other. But for a mutual understanding it is essential to get to know the living environment of others. Europe is indefinitely variegated in its regions, landscapes, traditions or epitomes of enjoyment! It is impossible to read it, you have to experience it!

And finally, town twinning still appeals to people of all ages and is therefore a project to connect generations. This is in the interest of the whole society.

III. Recent crisis of confidence in the EU and in the EU institutions

Regarding the recent crisis of confidence in the EU I believe devoutly that the traditional town twinnings can still make a valuable contribution.

The crisis manifests itself in two ways:

On the one hand confidence of the EU-citizens among each other is at risk

The economic crisis in many south-European member states has led to a strong north-south gap in the EU.

This has led to angry reservations on both sides which, in parts, are being fuelled from the media but also from populist parties.

On the one hand there is, for example, the "lazy Greek"

On the other hand German politicians are being reviled as Nazis due to the austerity policy.

But we know, that the Germans today are no Nazis and that the Greeks are working very hard.

Encounters between people make it clear that there is not only black or white. Town twinnings make these encounters possible.

If Greek or Spanish teenager graduate in Germany and report on the unemployment of entire families at home or that they are unable to pay their bills anymore, maybe our understanding here will increase for financial support within the framework of European solidarity between Member States and the feeling of solidarity among each other rises.

On the other hand the understanding for the hard austerity measures might increase when these teenagers see that the money for the financial aid programmes is not growing on trees but generated through hard work of the tax payers.

The second aspect of the confidence crisis is the alienation of the citizens from the EU and its institutions

The right-wing populists that succeeded in many European countries during recent elections question the idea of European integration.

I experience the representatives of these parties in the European Parliament, where, in the meantime, they account for 20% of all MEPs. They are not constructive-minded. They do not want European cooperation. They want to go back to exclusively nationalist patterns of thinking and acting.

One reason for the strengthening of these populist parties is the perception, that the EU departs from the citizens.

Sometimes one can indeed have this impression. With the years, the EU has increasingly intruded into everyday life. Regulating shower heads, vacuum cleaners and the flushing system of toilets is not the task of the EU. Nor is it the responsibility of the EU to tell people what they are allowed or supposed to eat and drink. The EU has drifted off towards a policy of paternalism. Thereby, the EU clearly exceeded its competencies.

In the United Kingdom, the government is of the opinion, that the EU sets too many standards that touch upon domestic politics. With a referendum they want to decide on EU membership. Prime Minister Cameron is, however, aware that an EU exit would be fatal for his country. After all, 40% of British exports go into the EU. Und when I think of how fiercely Cameron fought to prevent the Scots from separating from Great Britain, I am eager to see how he wants to try to talk British citizens out of the idea of EU exit.

According to the latest polls, 51% of citizens would vote in favour of EU-Exit. Thereby they would do their country a disservice.

Particularly cities as connecting link between citizens and the EU can help to change the negative image of the EU.

Two thirds of European citizens live in cities. There is no other level where as many European regulations and laws are being implemented as in the cities.

If you came on a walk with me through Recklinghausen, I could tell you for every shop and any range of goods how much EU is involved.

Long product warranties, the reduction and long-term abolishment of roaming fees, the security of toys and foodstuff - those are only some examples that show how we benefit from European legislation in everyday life.

But also the security of supply, for example with energy and food as well as the protection of our environment and health is being regulated on EU level.

Unfortunately, such good news are not being disseminated at home in the member states. "Only bad news sell" is the name of the game. When reporting about the EU, be it by the media or national politicians and governments, it is popular to pass the buck to the EU.

Things that go well were done by national governments, things that go wrong by the EU.

This squanders trust and does not do justice to the truth.

Town twinnings show, that there is also another way

Many partnerships have changed and became a forum, in which local city administrations exchange their experiences and problems with the implementation of EU laws.

In light of the economic crisis in many regions, town twinning contacts are also used to promote local SMEs and vocational training.

Cities and regions also increasingly seek to exercise their influence in Brussels

- Opening of regional representations
 - Representing local umbrella organizations, the German Association of Cities etc.
- Lead programme strengthening activities of cities vis-a-vis the EU
- Allowing citizens concrete participation in European topics
- Strengthens introduction of local interests at EU level via training programmes for local administrations
- Since 2013, the price "EU-active city" is being awarded

Especially at EU level we have always agitated for communes:

- Strengthening of communes through the Treaty of Lisbon
 - Codifies the right to communal self-administration for the first time
- There has to be an impact assessment for all EU-measures, which analyses the administrative and financial consequences of European legislation for communes
- EU-Funding
 - European Regional Development Fund
 - European Social Fund
 - Cohesion Fund
 - Especially the Ruhr, as structurally weak area, benefits from the funding

Despite of all these efforts there are, of course, still many challenges:

- Further strengthening of direct cooperation
 - It is unacceptable, that only 3 out of 24 German representatives in the Committee of the Regions are representatives from communes
- The Europe for Citizens programme, of which town twinnings are being financed, has still many significant weaknesses
- After the cuts in the EU-budget there are only 185,47 Mio. Euro available for the next 7 years.
- The responsible agency EACEA approves only 21% of the submitted applications
- Applications are extremely bureaucratic and complicated
- Application periods are too short
 - When forms are first being published in May 2014 one cannot demand from the applicant to submit the forms and documents within 2 months
- Services are only available in English and French
- My responsible colleague in the Committee on Culture and Education, Sabine Verheyen, has therefore already submitted a written question to the European Commission
- In its answer the Commission conveyed, that the application procedure will be simplified
 - The portal will be translated into all official languages

- For the future the data of the applicant will be stored in a central register so that it will be possible to access the stored data for further applications
- However, the application procedure remains complicated, especially considering that many applicants are working in an honorary capacity
- We will continue to plead for citizen-friendly application procedures

IV. Conclusion

I have presented the great achievements of town twinnings but also the many challenges they are facing

Although we are in the middle of a debt and economic crisis and many citizens are turning away from Europe because of the crisis we in Brussels are still convinced that we need "more Europe"

Therefore we have set the course for a stronger economic-political coordination at European level

Of course, a united Europe will finally only endure if it is carried by its citizens.

Town twinnings make a valuable contribution by communicating the idea of solidarity within the Union and by informing about the reasons for legislation from Brussels

I certainly speak for the whole European Parliament when I express my sincerest thanks to all activists in these partnerships